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Viewing cable 08MOSCOW1187, MOSCOW'S RUMORMILL ON SUCCESSION

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08MOSCOW1187	2008-04-28 14:19	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Moscow

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.spiegel.de/>

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VZCZCXRO9808
PP RUEHBW
DE RUEHMO #1187/01 1191419
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 281419Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7828
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 001187

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2018
TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI PINR RS
SUBJECT: MOSCOW'S RUMORMILL ON SUCCESSION

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Classified By: CDA Daniel Russell. Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Putin's actions since the March elections have heightened political uncertainty about the shape of the Medvedev-Putin tandem. Lacking hard information, everything from Putin's decision to head United Russia to administrative changes at the White House is seen by the chattering class

through the prism of the "succession question" - Putin's dilemma of leaving office without losing influence. Within the commentariat, two general lines have emerged. The "hand-off scenario" sees Putin marshaling control to protect his successor as regent before handing off the torch. The second, "Putin triumphant," scenario predicts a power shift from the Kremlin to the White House. Between the two are many variations, each with expectations of some conflict between Medvedev and Putin. In any case, Putin's tactical wiles have expanded his political options but have also deepened uncertainty about his intentions. End summary.

A Season of Elite Uncertainty

12. (C) Moscow is simmering with expectation about the coming transition as evidenced by the wide range of theories, speculation, and rumors (but no hard information) that our contacts are circulating. The center of the debate remains: how does a healthy, young, and popular politician like Putin retain influence after leaving the Kremlin in a system that accrues a preponderance of influence to the presidency (ref a). His decision to head, but not join, United Russia; warnings about the need to clean out that party; and the Kremlin's preference for secrecy about cadre changes have reinvigorated debate about the Medvedev-Putin tandem and deepened the uncertainty among the elite about the shape of things to come. Coupled with the natural nervousness about a change in administration (with reports that ministers and other top officials are afraid to travel out of concern of being "out of touch" during cadre selection), the tempo of rumor-mongering and speculation has increased exponentially.

13. (C) Despite their differences on a host of issues, our contacts all expected competition within the elite to increase. They predicted that struggles could affect the development of relations between Medvedev and Putin, notwithstanding what appears to be their shared values and close personal ties. Already, we have seen evidence that some within the elite are taking advantage of perceived weakness during the transition to pursue their agendas: Mikhail Fridman's moves against TNK-BP and Sergey Chemezov's accelerated campaign to draw more state assets into Rostekhnologiya.

14. (C) Elite disquiet stems as well from fears about impending changes in government cadres at the central and regional level. xxxxx accentuated Putin's call to reform United Russia, predicting a personnel shake-up that mysteriously would "change everything" yet would not involve the emergence of new faces in the leadership ranks. He expressed concern that United Russia's "monopoly of the political process" could be broken by splits within the party, although he did not consider the new "clubs" within the party as posing a danger in that regard. xxxxx also told us that a shake-up of the regional elite was already under way, with the replacement of the Irkutsk governor and the "voluntary" resignation of the Starvopol governor. Others have likewise predicted changes in the cadre ranks, but envision Putin positioning Medvedev to clean house, be it to remove Yeltsin-era warhorses like Moscow Mayor Luzhkov or Tatarstan President Shaymiyev xxxxx or remove troublesome siloviki hetmen xxxxx.

15. (C) xxxxx argued that the general uncertainty among the political elite flows from Putin's own indecisiveness. Rather than following a pre-ordained strategy, xxxxx described Putin as following a path of tactical decision, from the selection of Medvedev as successor to the snap United Russia congress April 21-22 where Putin agreed to take the helm. Moreover, xxxxx posits that because Putin has not ruled out a return to the Presidency, he faces the constraints of wanting to preserve the power of the presidency, even as he seeks insurance

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against the possibility that Medvedev could use that power against him. xxxxx agreed, speculating that Putin is seeking insurance against Medvedev in the coming months. Although xxxxx was largely dismissive of Medvedev, considering him

less a politician than an inexperienced administrator, he still sees risk to Putin as he takes over as Premier - an institutionally weaker position, with responsibility for unpopular decisions.

¶6. (C) There are others, however, who describe Putin's decisions as creating the foundation for a transition to a more institution-based political system. An article in xxxxx argued that the creation of a second center of power in the White House mitigates the risk of another round of re-distributing property or a change in the general course for the country. xxxxx told us that Medvedev has no recourse but to tap public support for his putatively more liberal agenda, much as Mikhail Gorbachev did in his struggle with the more conservative elements of the then Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the long run, xxxxx sees the potential for an evolution away from the inter-clan struggles to a public competition of ideas.

The Party of Putin

¶7. (C) Indicative of the uncertainty in Moscow, our interlocutors discussed a wide range of theories about Putin's decision to accept the United Russia leadership. As an advocate of the "Putin Triumphant" scenario, xxxxx saw Putin maneuvering the Duma, United Russia, and the regional elite to check the predominate influence that Medvedev will enjoy thanks to the constitution's bias in favor of the presidency. xxxxx explained his bid to head United Russia as a means to balance Medvedev's authority to appoint governors, by giving Putin control over the regional legislatures, whose approval is required before a gubernatorial candidate can take office. Moreover, xxxxx argued that by heading United Russia, Putin will be able to dominate the Duma and Federation Council and thus control the passage of legislation.

¶8. (C) xxxxx also saw Putin's leadership of the party as providing the basis for constraining Medvedev's ability to remove him from the premiership. xxxxx alleged that PA Head Sergey Sobyenin was working on legislation that would constrain the President's ability to dismiss the Premier, although she offered no information about how this could be done without altering the constitution, which Putin has repeatedly stated he will not do. In their xxxxx envisioned a similar motive, but a different tactic in Putin's decision. By controlling the majority party in the Duma, Putin insures that any move to remove him from the Premiership results in a political crisis. (The United Russia-controlled Duma could exercise its constitutional prerogative and refuse to approve Medvedev's choice for a replacement premier, leading to new elections and potential stalemate.)

¶9. (C) Not all of our contacts shared the view that Putin's recent moves represented a shifting of the balance of influence. xxxxx dismissed Putin's move to head United Russia as sign of his desperation, vice a strong tactical move to check Medvedev. xxxxx characterized United Russia as an amalgamation of careerists and bureaucrats, which is loyal to whoever holds power. Comments by xxxxx that United Russia is guided by self-interest, without any common values, appear to support xxxxx assertions. xxxxx called Putin's decision to take the party lead a mistake, seeing the processes underway now, including the sensational article about his marriage plans to gymnast-turned-Duma deputy Alina Kabayeva, as part of the inevitable "de-mystification" of the soon to be former president.

A New Kind of Premiership

¶10. (C) Against the backdrop of Putin's decision to head United Russia, news about the government structural and personnel changes have heightened speculation about a metamorphosis of the Premiership. Press reports last week told of a new paradigm in which virtually all responsibility outside of defense, security, and the protection of societal order that lay with the government (and ultimately the Premier) would be pushed down to the ministries. Initial reactions interpreted this as shaping a new order in the

government, in which the Premier sets the "strategic"

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direction and holds the expected new stratum of technocratic Deputy Premiers to account for the actions of the ministries. As such, proponents of this view argued that Putin is hoping that he can stand above the fray, blaming his subordinate "scapegoats" for any potential government failings or missteps. Others, however, see this less as a result of grand politics and more of a sensible re-alignment of duties - "housecleaning" before Putin takes office.

¶11. (SBU) There has also been considerable speculation about a reworking of the relationships between the President, the Premier, and the governors. The Kremlin and Minister for Regional Development Kozak took quick action to squash rumors floated in the business newspaper Vedemosti early this month that control over the regional plenipotentiaries (polpreds) would shift to the government, although Kozak but did not rule out future changes in the role and jurisdiction of the polpreds. xxxxx noted that changing the polpreds may not be necessary, since the government has responsibility for assessing the "effectiveness" of regional leaders and thus could shape the president's approach to gubernatorial appointments.

Comment

¶12. (C) The "succession question" continues to dominate the Russian political scene, despite the remarkable changes that have taken place over the past six months. Putin has proven his ability to reshape the landscape and create his own opportunities by accepting the Premiership under Medvedev as well as the mantle of "party leader" for United Russia, creating what some see as a potential alternative power center in the White House. Nevertheless, his success in spinning out alternatives for himself has served to prolong the agony of the "succession question" and fostered uncertainty among the elite. Uncertainty multiplies the risk of conflict between the elite clans over influence. Putin's problem can be seen as a Hobbesian security dilemma - the greater his personal security, the less security there is for the other players, including his chosen successor Medvedev.
Russell